

SOCIAL IDENTITY

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Social identity refers to the membership or association of an individual with a “primary” and other human groups, ranging from a nuclear family and expanding outward, based upon such factors as the individual’s capacities, experiences, mobility, and location. In more traditional societies, the identity structure tends to be hierarchical, such as in Iraq, where self-identification (especially in rural areas) is typically most strongly the immediate family, then with descending importance the extended family, village, clan, tribe, country, ethnicity, religious sect. [Patai, THE ARAB MIND; Wunderle, THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURAL AWARENESS; King, ROOTS OF IDENTITY]

The native language spoken by an individual is likely the strongest social identity; it is usually coincident with nuclear and extended family. The strength of “language group” identity resides with the fact that language provides the primary means to categorize, think about, make sense of, and express our understanding of reality – the physical world, our own thoughts, and interpersonal transactions. Language is the only way we have to acquire abstract concepts (e.g., love, freedom, power, etc.) and to increase our knowledge, other than direct physical experience. Language offers *belonging* with those who share it, and the smaller the language group, the stronger the bond. [King, ROOTS OF IDENTITY; Pinker, THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT; Pinker, HOW THE MIND WORKS]

Ethnicity is a powerful social identity, with multiple binding components: common biological origins, customs and habits, norms and mores, and even distinguishing physical features. Most often, ethnic groups share a common language, even if dialectical differences exist in sub-groups or geographically separated elements. Thinking of the French of France as an ethnic group brings to mind a range of traits and socio-cultural observables unique to that population. This is a stereotype, which helps to grasp many details by abstracting for memory; however, the individual variations among the French people make a stereotype of limited validity and use.

When distinct ethnic groups that are each homogeneous are closely located and their differences are significant, the psycho-social concept of the “other” frequently becomes powerful. This means that membership in one’s ethnic group is regarded as superior to the “other” and that the blame for a range of dissatisfactions or circumstances is assigned to the “other” group, or ethnicity. This was a primary aspect of the many wars between the French and the Germans over the 300 years between about 1650 and 1945. As a more intense form of ethnic allegiance, the tribe is a dominant social and cultural feature

throughout much of Africa, across the Middle East and South Asia, and in parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia. The tribe views itself as descending from common ancestors, and blood ties are close. [Salzmann, LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY]

Nationality, in the geographic-political sense of identity – with or without an ethnic foundation – can be a formidable social identity, especially in more developed countries with great internal mobility. Thus, the national self-identification of citizens of Israel, Switzerland, Singapore, or the United States has much meaning based upon common experiences and challenges of a relatively recent historical origin and unique political and humanist perspectives. Nationality with a common cultural and language base has given rise to “nationalism” in the last century, which was a major force in de-colonization in Southeast Asia, and Africa. [Fischer, MINDSETS: THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND PERCEPTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS]

There is a “power of place” that affects all humans; the affection for the familiar land of our upbringing and of our economic basis of life. In mainland Southeast Asia, there is a fundamental distinction, usually prejudicial, between the lowland rice-growing majority populations and the mountain-dwelling tribes, who live from the forest and different food production. Neither willingly lives in the “other’s” domain, and the sacred places of each are different. In all countries with seacoasts, there are ancient fishing communities where life is defined by the ocean and the weather, and seamanship is the primary skill of value.

There is a range of “self-defined” or self-selected social identities, including professional or vocational membership (e.g., doctor, scientist, educator, politician, cleric, warrior), or socio-economic categories (e.g., middle class, artists, business). The attitudes typical of each and behavioral influences emanating from each will vary, yet they are generally discernible and can be known. This categorical analysis is a useful early stage in moving toward a behavioral assessment of a specific small group or specific individuals.